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Free PDF Editor Software Roundup

By Dustin Sklavos, NotebookReview Staff | Thursday, August 05, 2010 | 42814 Reads

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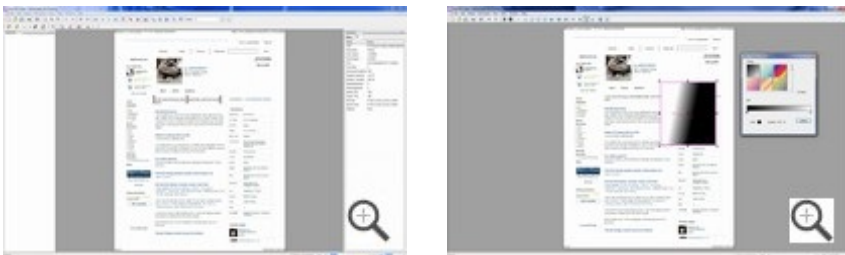
By *Dustin Sklavos*

Whether we like it or not, the Adobe's PDF file has become the standard for shipping documents back and forth on the internet. It's not a bad way to go; PDF files include text, images, they can have editable portions, and they can have excellent compression provided you use them right. The other side of the equation is that Adobe's Reader has tended to feel a bit slow and bloated. Oh, and **Adobe Acrobat** proper -- the software needed to make your own PDF, at least from Adobe -- is priced to move at just \$299. Because really, who can't appreciate a good bargain?

The price tag on Adobe Acrobat is onerous at best and highway robbery at worst, but we shouldn't let that stop us from enjoying the benefits of the PDF format. In fact, we're so keen on getting the most out of the flexible filetype, we're rounding up five free software options for editing your own PDF files.

FOXIT PDF EDITOR

While **Foxit** does charge \$99 for a single license of their PDF editor, it's free to use indefinitely in their "evaluation mode." This mode adds a Foxit watermark to each page of your edited PDF.



Above-left I've loaded up the PDF printout I made (using Adobe's own PDF printing option) of my profile for OKCupid, saved for posterity in case someone in the site's administration

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realized one of their users was actually a dinosaur. The first thing you'll notice is the mountain of icons alongside Foxit's properties and bookmark sidebars, and it's honestly a bit daunting.

When you do select something from the bottom bar, Foxit bumps you into a subscreen that takes away the other options to focus on what you're choosing to add or edit. Foxit lets you add shapes, text, and other odd geometry, and you can import fonts into your PDF.

The problem I ran into with Foxit is that it just wasn't that easy to use; it felt obtuse, and I couldn't easily find a function that would just allow me to make a user-editable text box the way Acrobat does. Acrobat may be \$299, but it's also extremely simple to use. Foxit PDF Editor also doesn't include a PDF virtual printer component, which I honestly think should be part and parcel with the whole deal. You can download that for free (well, provided you sign up for a one year "free license"), but why not just include it with the PDF Editor proper? Again, this is something Acrobat does and makes incredibly simple.






What may be most damning is that it *didn't work*. My charming velociraptor profile, once saved from the editor, actually will not open in Adobe Reader anymore and spits out an error. I had intended to show you an example of the Foxit watermark, but I can't do that if Foxit doesn't produce a working PDF.

NITRO PDF

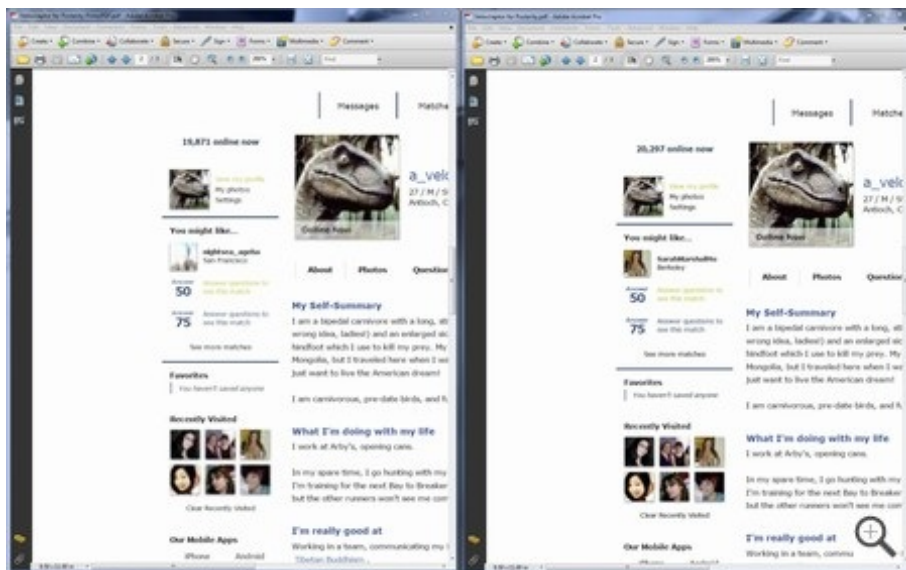


When we move on to Nitro's PDF products, we stumble onto, well, a bit of a mess. Nitro offers **PDF Express** and **PDF Professional** editing suites that cost money, but their free software is mostly a series of one-off PDF tools and for the life of me I can't understand why these products couldn't have been condensed. Did **PDF-to-Excel** and PDF-to-Word really need to be separate apps?

What we're left with is looking at **PrimoPDF** first and foremost, which doesn't actually edit PDF files but instead is basically a virtual PDF printer. Nitro advertises it with a lot of bigger words, but at the end of the day it's still just a virtual PDF printer. PrimoPDF output is shown below-left, Adobe PDF output is below-right.

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While overall quality seems similar between Adobe's reference PDF printer and PrimoPDF's, there are two major differences: the first is that Adobe's presets produce a 44KB file with substantially cleaner image compression, while Primo's produce an 80KB file that has notably worse image quality.

And as you can see, it doesn't produce any fundamental visual differences from Adobe's own reference PDF printer, and this can probably be attributed to how Firefox itself handles printing web pages. There is a notable difference in file size, though: Adobe's presets produce a 44-KB PDF, while PrimoPDF produces an 80KB PDF. With a small document like this that may not amount to much but something bigger and more complex can get bloated in a hurry.

If you want to do any actual PDF editing you'll have to use Nitro's web-based application, the intimidating-sounding **PDF Hammer**. Unfortunately, PDF Hammer is in beta and wasn't available online to be tested at the time of writing.

PDFILL

While the **PDFill website** advertises multiple different tools, thus causing your humble writer's brow to crease in much the same as it did when he tried to parse all the different tools on Nitro's website, there's really only one download and mercifully it integrates a lot



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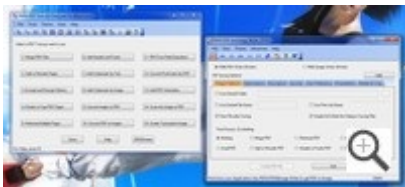
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of functionality and stamps the word "FREE" all over it.



The free parts of PDFill's kit are the **Tools** (editor) and the **PDF and Image Writer** (virtual printer), and for once we're seeing some simplicity we can appreciate. What you're going to notice once you start digging, however, is that PDFill Tools is extremely basic and has virtually no care

taken toward the user interface. There are icons producing what is ostensibly a toolbar, but that toolbar is honestly just the functions listed in the text buttons below, condensed into icons.

I went ahead and tested the merge function and found it to be simple enough, and the resulting file wound up being exactly that: I merged Wes Craven's original screenplay for *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3* with my velociraptor profile and came up with a file that contained both and had a file size roughly equal to the two individual files combined.

Finally, to test the quality of PDFill's virtual printer, I went ahead and saved my profile again. Lo and behold, the output was a staggering 153KB file; Adobe's defaults produced a file just a quarter the size. The image quality was definitely there compared to the Adobe version, but the file size is ungainly and worse, PDFill Tools didn't offer an option to do any kind of basic optimization on PDF files to shrink them down (a feature Foxit claims to have before outputting busted files). What does bear mentioning about PDFill's virtual printer is that it's extremely flexible: it doesn't just output to PDF files, it also supports PNG, JPG, BMP, TIF, and GIF files.

I think the most bizarre thing about PDFill may be that at no point does it actually allow you to look at a PDF or image file. All of its controls and settings are more or less text-based, but there's still a decent amount of functionality here for the low price of free.

PDFESCAPE.COM

If you'd rather do your work from within the cloud, **PDFEscape.com** is certainly an option. Also available for the low price of free, PDFEscape lets you create an account (or not!) and will even save your work on their servers.

Starting out with PDFEscape is about as simple as you could ask, but there's a big limitation: the file you upload to edit must be under 2MB and fewer than 50 pages. Given

the inherent "digital document" nature of PDF files, this is going to rule PDFEscape out for some users, depending on their needs.



Once you actually upload your chosen file (once again going with the velociraptor profile), PDFEscape takes you to a fairly basic interface that nonetheless covers the basics, allowing for simple navigation and magnification of your PDF file.

It's problematic. PDFEscape appears to be almost strictly additive, which is vastly to its detriment. PDF files are optimized combinations of text and images; not being able to actually edit the text of the PDF file in question is a major loss. The JavaScript-based renderer PDFEscape uses is also snappy enough, but there's clearly a sacrifice made: the quality when moving between scales is lackluster and blurry. While you can actually create a PDF with proper interactive form boxes that can be filled in, overall the program's wholly additive nature prevents you from really editing your files at all.

PDFEscape also can't be used to convert web pages or other documents into PDF files, again curtailing its usability.

OPENOFFICE



Finally, as a brief aside, it bears mentioning that the **OpenOffice** does include its own PDF export feature. It can't do any PDF editing proper, but it can at least produce a PDF file on its own without the need for a virtual printer application.

For testing I used my resume from OpenOffice.org Writer and exported it to a PDF file. My resume is, as I hope yours is, devoid of images, but it gives us a chance to see how well the built-in PDF exporter works, and nearest I can tell it works just fine. The exporter does give you some control over image compression and would probably allow you to reach a reasonable file size. My own one-page resume resulted in a 32KB PDF file. Not too shabby.

CONCLUSION

This has been an enlightening but also disappointing experience. I've used Adobe's own Acrobat software for my PDF needs for a while now and found it to offer the right amount of simplicity and flexibility, but trying to make it in the wilderness of free PDF applications is troubling. Editing a document isn't the most challenging thing in the world, and I think OpenOffice pretty much proves that free software doesn't have to unilaterally suck. Yet none of our competitors today make a convincing case for themselves above the rest.

Foxit might seem like the most powerful, useful software available, but I wasn't able to test its watermark because the files it produced couldn't be opened in Adobe Reader. It's very rare I have the opportunity to test software that stone cold doesn't do what it's supposed to, with the last one having been [Corel's VideoStudio Pro X3](#). So, Foxit, I salute you.

Nitro PDF offers a lot of little tools, but I refuse to believe it's unreasonable to request the ability to download one suite of software to handle basic PDF editing tasks. Their PrimoPDF virtual printer could probably produce good-looking results with decent compression after some tweaking, so out of the lot of these that's probably the easiest piece of software to recommend if you just want to export a PDF file. The fact that the beta for PDF Hammer was down doesn't bode well.

PDFfill offers a reasonable set of tools and is certainly worth at least trying, but the interface is woefully archaic, but it also produced the most bloated PDF files in my testing. If you need do only the most basic of PDF editing, like changing metadata, merging PDF files, or cutting pages, it'll do the trick. Likewise, at least the virtual printer is pretty flexible, offering multiple different output modes beyond just PDF.

PDFescape.com was an abject disappointment and barely qualifies as an actual editor. Ignoring file size and page limitations for a moment, consider that despite the fact that PDF files include text as text and that even the program itself was able to search out words within the PDF file, you couldn't actually *edit* anything. All you could do was "whiteout" -- which meant putting a big white rectangle over parts of the file -- and that ignores the additive nature of all the other functions. There's ultimately very little to recommend PDFescape.com over the admittedly anemic tools PDFfill makes available.

Overall, this was a pretty dismal affair. It's not unreasonable to ask for software that actually edits PDF files and takes full advantage of the format, but none of our entrants were able to fit the bill. There wasn't anything that could even come close to replacing

Adobe's application. As a writer it's my job to offer alternatives to you, the consumer, and I'm left feeling frustrated. For most basic PC-related tasks, there are free and usable alternatives. Image editors can always use the GIMP. OpenOffice is a very reasonable free alternative to Microsoft's Office suite, able to replicate an alarming amount of functionality. But beyond having a couple of solid options for PDF printing, this seems to be a horribly underserved market. Unfortunately, until someone steps up and produces a clean, basic, easy-to-use PDF editor, it's Adobe's market to lose.

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